

## CHAIRMAN CHRISTOPHER COX

### *Homeland Security Update...*

*HSC Press Shop: (202) 226-9600*

<http://homeland.house.gov>



### **Powell Requests Extension for Biometric Passports**

In an opinion piece in today's Wall Street Journal, Secretary of State Colin Powell asked Congress for two-year extension of the deadline for Visa Waiver Program (VWP) countries to begin issuing biometric passports. Current legislation (*the Enhanced Border Security and Visa Entry Reform Act of 2002*) requires that each of the 27 countries covered by the program – including Britain, France, Germany, and Japan – begin issuing biometric passports by October 26, 2004. Secretary Powell expressed concern that the Visa Waiver Program countries will be unable to meet this deadline.

Secretary Ridge's decision to begin enrolling VWP travelers in the US-VISIT program as of September 30, 2004, is a significant step to enhance security screening of these individuals. Since going live in early January 2004, the US-VISIT system has intercepted over 200 persons with prior or suspected criminal or immigration violations. At the same time, the biometric scan has added little or no additional time to arrival procedures for foreign visitors.

A total of 13 million VWP visitors came to the United States in FY 2003. According to U.S. travel industry figures for 2002, visitors from VWP countries spent some \$38 billion while visiting this country. The Secretary's request recognizes that if no extension is granted, the negative implications for tourism and travel to the United States will be enormous, as will the added burden on U.S. embassies and consulates abroad.

By continuing to encourage travel by foreign nationals under the Visa Waiver Program, the Departments of Homeland Security and State, continue to promote America's openness to the world, while taking necessary steps to enhance the nation's safety. Extending the deadline, while aggressively implementing biometric standards, is a responsible way to balance important national interests.